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Bixby's Bridge

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THE story of John Bixby must begin with hearsay, as it came to me from his mother when, after I had engaged board with her for the summer, she sat with me for a while in my room and gave me her life history.

Where her son's ruinous ambitions had come from Mrs. Bixby had no idea, but was certain that it was not from *her* side of the family. No doubt, therefore, it was his father's fault; but as he had been killed at his job—which was track-walking—within a year of their marriage, she hardly felt, looking back over a quarter of a century, that she had been to any extent acquainted with his true character. She wished to be quite fair and reserved in her judgment, but it was clear, as she sat with a strong hand on either knee and considered the old romance which was responsible for that sick lad in the attic, that she felt she might have done better. Moreover, she made it plain that, but for John and his sickness, she might do better even now. She was not, she said, an old woman yet; but where was the man who would take on an invalid stepson?

It had been one of her own city boarders who had given young Bixby that deplorable ambition of his. A chit of seventeen or thereabout who wore ruffles, and whose mother went off at last, leaving an unpaid laundry bill. Having, therefore, received this enormous inspiration, John Bixby looked about him and decided on mechanical engineering for a career. But first he must work his way through college.

I believe it was pneumonia that he had that first winter. He was boarding himself, and also had to heat his own room. Fuel was dear. Having been so badly set back by sickness, of course he had to study very hard the next summer, and this had to be done at night, because

in the daytime his mother needed his help about the house. But Mrs. Bixby always turned the gas low at the meter at night, and it was difficult to see by so tiny a flame as his one jet afforded. So some of his almost imperceptible hoard had to go for glasses in the fall. But even with glasses his eyes bothered him a good deal the next winter, and for economy he had to discriminate rather sharply against his stomach. I *think* the girl with ruffles wrote to him now and then during this interval. On this point his mother was uncertain, though she was sure that *he* wrote.

In his Junior year he began to have rheumatism and his eyes were very much worse. He never went back for his Senior year. By then he was as blind as a stone and had many great pains throughout his body, and lay day and night in the same little garret bedroom where he had dreamed his first dream of ambition at the bidding of the girl with ruffles.

He had good care—at first, anyway. He was an interesting case. The local doctor dropped in often. Once a physician from the city came up on purpose to have a look. And the village people talked with pride of their "ossified" man, who must lie there, goodness knew how many years, turning to stone. It was the popular belief that he would live until the heart itself turned to stone; then, they argued, not without reason, he must die. If the physicians spoke in other terms they were no more optimistic. They would have been glad to have this interesting case in a proper hospital where it could be under observation. But right there Mrs. Bixby's maternal instinct asserted itself and she put her foot down. It may be also that the singularity of her son's case seemed to her in a way a distinction that in some measure atoned for his sad failure in all other ways. I would not say that she basked in the interest of her

neighbors, and found keen pleasure in the occasional newspaper paragraphs concerning him. No, one could hardly say that.

If it hadn't been for the boarders, she explained to me, with a high note of pathos, she could have moved him down-stairs; but she could not give up her bread-and-butter, so he had to keep his attic room, though, indeed, it made her many weary steps; and, to be sure, it did get hot in summer and she couldn't seem to keep the flies out.

Yet, to do her justice, I believe that John Bixby was unfeignedly glad to be thus kept by his mother. The lonely heart that was to turn to stone some day was a very soft and affectionate one, and, when bereaved of all else in the world, turned helplessly and gratefully to that rough shelter.

If, for a time, he thought wistfully about the ruffy girl, this pain can hardly have lasted long, for the distance of the stars was between them, and things so very far away are no longer real. But one thought remained. One thing whispered constantly at his ear and drew incessant splendid visions upon his stone-blind eyeballs. That was work. At first his longing for work ran upon near, small, almost practical schemes.

"If I could only use my hands, mother, you could teach me to knit."

But he could not use his hands. He could breathe and eat and, in some sort, sleep. That was all, except think. He could do *that*.

"The doctor says," he confided to a spruce young clergyman, "that I may live for years. He says it as if it were a pleasant thing. Would you, if you were I?"

He paid but little attention to the young man's stern denunciation of suicide.

"Anyway, the only thing I could do would be not to eat, and mother puts things into me with a spoon. If I didn't swallow, she would hold my nose the way she used to do when she gave me medicine. Funny, how you *can't* hold your breath. At least I can't."

But there came a day when his mother found his pale face glowing with pleasure.

"Mother, I can *imagine* I'm at work!

I've even imagined the place I'm in, down to the every nubbin of cactus and the wind-marks in the sand. There's a lot of niggery Spanish Indians in my gang, and a red-headed Irishman to cuss them out. Ambitious lad—wants to be an engineer himself some day. It's a railroad bridge. Wild country—snakes, tarantulas. Oh, I've got 'em down fine! I've got 'em digging. And my plans are all drawn. I can remember all I learned and can figure in my head. You'd be surprised if you could see the inside of my head, mother. I'd no idea it was so full of things. I thought things sifted out of one's brain about as fast as they went in, but everything's there."

At this point, scandalized, his mother made off for the efficient young minister. Presumably John Bixby talked straight on in her absence. When she came back with the minister his tongue was still going.

"Why, I can spend a year on it—longer, for I won't let it go any faster than it really would."

The minister listened silently for a while, observing the happiness of the unconscious face, and no doubt its youth appealed to his own youth. He turned away, rather scared at a sudden realization of the largeness of the things he did not know, and reassured the mother somewhat brusquely as to the morality of her son's spending his time that way.

So John Bixby built bridges in this manner for five years.

To this point her harsh narrative took me, and I seemed to gather out of it something of John Bixby—something that oppressed and terrified me as it had oppressed and terrified the young clergyman. I went out, when at last the woman left me, and took a long walk among those green and cultivated hills, found myself at last by a multiple-sounding little brook and listened to it and looked upon it avidly. Whatever I saw and touched took on an amazing preciousness. Though I did not blasphemously thank God that I was not as Mrs. Bixby's son, I was filled with terror at what a man may endure. I was like one of some group of placid, feeding brutes when one of their number is seized. They must have a little season

to recover themselves before they can go on with their harmless munching.

I did not return until dusk, and so, as I went down the hill, I had a momentary glimpse of a light in that hot and wretched room under the roof, and of Mrs. Bixby passing the window, bearing a plate.

Something about that window summoned and entreated me. I resolved that I would visit him.

I found the room clean in the same efficient, soapy way that obtained throughout the house, but only one of the small windows was open, and the screen had rusty gaps at the side through which the flies and mosquitoes might go and come at will. It was breathless there. Outside there were June roses, and a cool, sweet breeze, and a kitten was playing in and out among the roses to the laughter of a young girl.

You would have thought those wide, brown eyes could see. But if they did see, their vision did not include anything in the room.

I had brought some of the roses with me, and I laid one beside his face on the pillow without speaking. I had been warned that if one spoke he ceased to talk of his imaginings.

"That is strange," said he, a pleased perplexity in his almost inaudible voice. "There can be no roses *here*. It must come from that other. . . . Is some one here, then?"

I laid aside my caution and made some effort at explaining my presence. He did not fall silent, however, but, having listened, thanked me, and went on to talk of that which I wished to hear. Knowing of his phantom bridges, I listened at first with swelling tears of pity for the delusion upon which he fed, for by this time it had passed all bounds of solitary pastime. But as he went on, I experienced suddenly that singular shudder with which one's flesh acknowledges an appeal to the sixth sense. I leaned closer to the scarcely moving lips, trembling. . . . Delusion?

His articulation was so difficult, the whisper often so low, so broken, so disconnected, that I must give up any attempt to tell the thing in his own words. It was exactly as if one were listening at a long-distance telephone.

You felt that the real speaker was remote from those almost immobile lips. This thing upon the bed, pitiable, not alive, was merely a bit of mechanism. For the broken messages that came were all of freedom, of great sweeping valleys, which he descended at will; of soaring mountains which he lightly ascended. I gathered that the sun rose from a plain and went down behind those mountains; that there were forests, and a great and beautiful desolation. Some feeling, too, about the North, as if it were near and menacing; yet he spoke once or twice of flowers.

It was not at once that I obtained this understanding of the country out of which John Bixby was speaking. At first the words came slowly and under the breath, like a man talking to himself. But afterward, when he had accepted my presence, instead of resenting it, as I had been forewarned he would do, he took pains to speak more clearly. I seemed, in fact, to be regarded by him as in some sort a fellow-spectator, a bodiless presence which kept pace with him among his valleys and boulders, so that at times, especially as that crisis of all his affairs drew on, and he fell into great doubt and perplexity, and fear came upon him and he fled here and there in aimless terror — then, sometimes, it was clear that my presence comforted him, and then, as he could, he spoke clearly.

For the long dream that had begun so splendidly and in which he had taken so much comfort was no longer untroubled. That which had been his only toy was a toy no longer. He was lost in it, overwhelmed, tossed here and there by strange forces.

Yet he was still building bridges as at the beginning. Only this bridge, it seemed, was a grander affair than any that had gone before. And there was another difference. When the play began he had been accustomed to direct his phantom crew in his own person — just as children are the heroes of their long epics. But now he seemed to be a spectator merely, and his inability to break through and direct things as formerly occasioned him the keenest distress.

I have seen fine points of sweat spring

out upon his forehead as he tried to make his wishes understood by a certain vigorous phantom he called Terence. This man seemed to be the same as the red-headed Irishman who had been his foreman when his fancies began. I am not sure of this. If it is so, it throws the whole matter into even greater confusion and mystery. For *that* man must surely have been no more than a creature of the lad's sick brain, while this other— But I must even tell the tale as it came to me.

Terence, then, was a very large part of the management of that road to the north. Some vague conception I obtained of a long trail of great activity, like nothing so much as a moving procession of ants who have laid a line of march from some far corner of the back yard through a house to the incalculable treasure of a sugar-barrel, and whose innumerable caravan moves day and night on the business of its safe bestowal. In exactly this manner I saw a black line of men stretching over plains, bridging valleys, burrowing through mountains, to that point in the far northwest where, under the unmelting snow, lay enormous coal-fields.

Terence's bridge was stationed at the farthest point of this line, crossing a ravine at the bottom of which ran a little stream which had once been a huge river. At one side of the bridge there rose a mountain, sheer and dreadful, crowned with rock masses which had stood since the world was.

I gathered that Terence was enormously proud of that bridge; that it was his first real achievement of note; that his love for it was maternal; that he sat out and looked at it under the evening sky as a mother sits by the crib of a sleeping child, watching the perfection of the little face.

At such times John Bixby appeared to be sitting beside him, talking, talking—using terms which I could not understand, relative to the utter excellence of that bridge and the satisfactory outlook for Terence's own future. Terence was to be married, it seemed, wherefore his assignment to this bridge had meant very much indeed.

But at other times Bixby would be terribly out of patience with this Ter-

ence of his, and spend hours of tempestuous argument and explanation.

"Damn it!" said he, after a long, technical harangue which had so fatigued me that I was on the point of leaving him, "if it wasn't for Sally, you could fight it out for yourself. Where'd you be then? Where'd you be without *me*? It's not *your* brain that has put it through—though I can't blame you for not knowing that, I suppose. *I'm* the one that does it. And make the most of me, for I can't tell how long I shall be able to keep this thing up." And then, in a sighing aside, "Oh, if I could only *talk* to him instead of this pushing against air. . . ."

After this outbreak I went out of that presence with new and strange ideas, bewildered and stumbling. That night I arranged my notes. Away from the sick-room they seemed to take on a certain coherence. *What* the coherence pointed to I did not dare to think.

It was soon after this that the great distress I have spoken of came upon John Bixby. His mother met me one morning with an excited air, saying that he was very wild. He was talking louder. She feared he would disturb the boarders. Yes, I might go in if I liked, but be careful not to excite him any more. Such nonsense she had never heard—quite delirious—seemed to be afraid of a tree. She had a mind to call in the doctor. When I sat down beside him he recognized my presence with what seemed relief.

"See that eagle?" he said to me. "His nest is in it. *He* knows enough to worry. It has moved three feet in the last half-hour. That doesn't look like much from here, but it's an awful lot when you think what must be moving with it! It's the blasting has done it, I suppose. . . . Terence! I can't seem to reach the man at all. Where are his ears? Why can't he hear for himself? I've been hammering at him all day, and now it's getting dark" (it was ten o'clock in the morning where *we* were). "It will come on them in the night. . . ."

"What's all this, John?" said a jovial, patronizing voice behind me. "What's all this about a moving tree? I thought you were a sensible fellow."

The tormented voice from the bed hesitated as if perplexed and at fault. The local doctor took my place beside him, touching the wrist in the conventional manner.

John Bixby seemed gathering himself together; he spoke carefully, as one man to another—wistfully, too, knowing the hopelessness of getting a hearing.

"The old pine with the eagle's nest in it," said he, "has changed its position with respect to the rock formation behind it. A very large portion of rock near the summit has been loosened, possibly by the blasting. A rock slide is inevitable—very soon, and I cannot make myself understood when I try to warn them. I know what you think of it, Dr. Brown, but I am *not* delirious. This thing is as real as the room in which I lie and hear your voice and cannot move. You must not interfere with me in any way. I *must* reach those people."

The physician murmured something consolatory and reassuring, said he would leave something that would fix all that, and left it in a glass and went out.

"Listen to me, John Bixby," I said, when we were alone.

"I am listening," said the voice, faint and distant again, as though half a world away and speaking over a troubled wire.

"Where are you?"

There was hesitation.

"I don't know," came finally, despairingly.

"You know that your body lies sick and motionless in your mother's house?"

"Of course I know that," was the impatient answer.

"Yet you talk of mountains and of a bridge in danger. *Where* are those things? Can't you tell me the names of the people? If you could tell me more. If you are seeing—whatever way it is that you see it—some danger threatening this place, I might be able to get a message there in time."

He seemed to strain against some difficulty. One got an idea, in spite of his marble stillness, of straining muscles, of some power taxed to its utmost.

"No," came the answer at length.

"But why?" I cried. "If you can see so much, can you not see a little more?"

"When I try to see more," he answered, wearily, "it breaks and changes. No, I must try to make him feel me as I have before. . . . Terence! Terence!" he began. "For God's sake look at that tree! Turn your ear to the sound of that inward slipping. Get your men out! . . . No, I can't reach him. It's only when he thinks about his construction that I can make him understand. Yet—there must be a way. . . . Terence! My God, he *sees* me! How he stares! Get your men out! . . . Now I can't do any more. Ah, he has heard it at last. . . . He hears the rocks. . . . There will not be time—not half enough time. I must save them—I! And I am only air—nothing! They are real—they are loved and needed. They have women and children. Their bodies can be hurt. Ah, God! such splendid nerves and muscles to be ground down into waste! Must I watch this thing when a word would save them?"

A quiver—but not of muscular movement; that could not be—ran over him. I saw that his hair was as damp as a swimmer's. Then his voice rang out clear and strong, yet somehow with that strange effect of distance.

"Men! Men! Look up!"

After an interval, in a sobbing whisper: "They heard. Their faces turned my way. They have seen; they are coming out. . . . They are safe."

Another silence, and then, solemnly, "It is coming."

The room was very still. A wasp droned against the pane of the window, and a girl's laugh came in from the lawn where the kitten was again at play. Instead of these light sounds I felt that my ears should have been stunned by a world-splitting crash. My ear was at the receiver. Would no sound come? Almost I thought that the mechanism had been destroyed and no more of the message would ever come over the wire. But at last the lips moved again.

"A hundred feet deep. A hundred feet of broken rock. It fills the cañon from side to side. It moves and settles, like coal that has just been sent down to its bin through a chute. It will lie there till the end of the world. And the bridge under it. There is a branch

of the eagle's tree sticking up like a dead man's arm. But there are no dead men down there—none. The eaglet is under. There go the birds, circling about and mourning. And there at the very edge stand Terence and his men—safe. Safe through me . . . who am . . . nothing. . . . But I have done a man's work . . . after all . . . after all."

In the silence that followed upon these words his changelessness seemed, in some subtle way, broken. There was a different look in the blind eyes. When the room had filled with people I do not know; but now I was thrust aside by his mother, who fell upon her knees and clutched at him with high, throaty lamentations of which he seemed entirely unaware. His next words were for his Terence.

"You wish you were under it, don't you, old man? But Sally doesn't. You go to her. She will make you see it is nothing, after all . . . nothing . . ."

The faltering voice strengthened as with a great surprise, an amazement greater than the laboring heart could bear.

"What is this?"

But while we stood about, bewildered and still expectant, a hand came in front of the curiously bright face, touched it very gently, and closed the eyelids—a fine, professional hand. I looked about and recognized a famous physician who was spending a few days at the hotel.

"I wish," he said to the local doctor, "I might have seen this case sooner. It seems to have been most unusual."

I went out into the hot and golden afternoon. The pure air, flower-scented, rushed to meet me. I was dizzy with the heat and closeness, confused by the strangeness of what I had heard. For if the dead do sometimes break through and speak, why, then, might not poor Bixby, who had really been of the dead these five years?

Somewhere I was positive, but where, were Terence and those others even then standing aghast, with the still quivering rock slide at their feet? Under what sky were the eagles now circling above their ruined nest?

I was the only one of all who had heard, who believed that there might be something in it besides delirium. After a little I also lost faith in its reality, yet for months I watched the papers furtively.

It was not, however, until a year later that I came upon anything that might fit. Then, in an illustrated weekly I found an article illustrated with photographs of the very nearly completed work of a certain railroad. And there was one picture showing a mountain with a great scar upon its flank, and in the foreground a mound of broken rock out of which a dead tree-top protruded. There was also an arrangement of derricks and an abrupt ending of the thread of railroad at the edge of the rock. A group of men in the foreground turned sheepish grins toward the camera. Underneath this picture a paragraph from the article had been set:

The engineering difficulties were very great. A hundred feet deep under a mass of fallen rock lie the ruins of the Sisco bridge, which was practically completed at the time of the slide, and said to have been one of the most perfect of its kind in existence. A triumph of engineering skill. The men escaped as by a miracle, for the thing happened altogether without warning. It is said that they were warned in the nick of time by some stranger—probably a prospector, as there are no white inhabitants within several hundred miles, and that this man is the only one to have lost his life. At any rate, he was never seen after that one appearance. For this reason, no doubt, there seems an undercurrent of belief among the men—who are chiefly of Celtic origin—that there was something supernatural in the circumstance, but they are chary of discussing this aspect of it.

Yes, one would be chary of discussing it.

